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### Racing Anew

OUR HEARTS WERE THRILLED the next day, tears of relief mingling with tears of pain, when we met Uncle Dukas' family at a mosque crowded with refugees. Together, under the auspices of the Red Cross, we found temporary quarters there for a month.

Then we heard about free housing and pieces of property being offered to refugees in various parts of Greece due to a new government-sanctioned exchange of the Moslems in Greece for the Greek Orthodox people in Asia Minor, so we sailed south to the island of Crete where some of our relatives had already settled.

There the government allotted us a two-story house and three parcels of land near the river-drained slopes of Perivolia, a village four kilometers from Chania, the island's capital. In 1923, however, malaria broke out in Perivolia, so we moved in with some other relatives in the refugee-filled district of Splantzia in Chania.

The capital, located on the northwest coast of this historic island, stirred a familiar vein of sentiment. It evoked within me feelings rooted in my experiences in Akçay, the coastal town which twice marked the beginning of our freedom; and in Thessaloniki, the coastal city where I first became a scout, the seaport where my friends and I used to spend hours fishing and frolicking on the shores washed by the Aegean Sea.

Chania was a city boxed within a moat and a wall built in A.D. 1252 by the Venetians after Crete came under their control as part of the Frankish Empire. The small Venetian harbor of Chania enclosed all the northern part of the city.

To form the harbor, a long wall (the chord) was stretched over a succession of rocks, built at the end of which was a minaret-like beacon. Two-thirds of the residents in the old city were previously Turks, the majority having lived in Splantzia, a district whose narrow passes and cobblestone alleys were the vestiges of the 400-year Turkish occupation of Greece.

I loved the old city by the sea. Hard-working fishermen, fishing gear in their hands from sunrise to sunset, looked daily to its sunbathed shores for livelihood. Determined caiques (light vessels) and flotillas dared the waves of the open sea before sundown, dragging freshly mended fishing nets across the golden Gulf of Chania, their shimmering lights timelessly studded along the horizon by night.

I was seventeen. Disease-stricken Perivolia promised me no future except that of a petty farmer. I aspired to go to high school in Chania, but my family was poor and needed my help. So I set my sights on the sea, which seemed to promise me new horizons and new hopes.

Before leaving home to go to sea, I went to St. Nikolaos church in our neighborhood and lit a candle to Saint George for good luck. Perhaps some day I would be able to sail to California and claim the inheritance from the gold mines my two Italian great-uncles had reportedly left before they died in their early thirties. And so I became a ship boy.

TRAVELING at sea from seaport to seaport on a cargo ship meant hard work, my diligence at which earned me the captain's favor. In less than two months I was given a chance at the helm under the watchful eye of the tall, imposing captain.

But aboard the ship were robust, sunbaked seamen who had long vied for a chance to become Captain Mitsos' right-hand man. Now they suddenly found themselves staring nonplused at a jovial, skinny teenager conversing on the bridge for hours on end with their stern captain. Soon I became a subject of resentment, a situation which, coupled

with several offensive advances by homosexuals on board, made me want to quit and return home.

My heart, however, held on to the captain's promise of some day making me "Captain of the Aegean."

And so for five more months I experienced the thrill of seeing our seaworthy 800-ton cargo vessel *Troas* obey my commands by day and by night, in still blue waters or in the rough seas, and even in the critical moments of entering and leaving congested harbors.

But by the end of my seventh month at sea, repeated attempts by two homosexuals to harm me, once even at knifepoint, were more than I could bear.

"Did they harm you in any way?" Captain Mitsos asked, his narrowed brown eyes gleaming above his bearded face.

"No, Captain, they never did—"

"You said they wielded knives?"

"Yes, Captain. This last time they—"

"Tell me about it."

"Well, Captain, as I tried to wrest the knife from one of them, the other put his knife to my back. I—I guess it was more like revenge out of jealousy than molestation they had in mind—"

"Go on."

"See—uh—I gave them my word that if they'd let me go, I—I'd never give away their names—"

"You wouldn't?"

"That's a promise I made, Captain—"

His eyes met mine for five long seconds. Then, suddenly we had a good laugh.

"Well, Panos," said Captain Mitsos, grabbing me by the shoulders, "that's one thing I like about you—your straight-forwardness."

But in my heart I had resolved to put an end to my challenging, though in some ways unpleasant, life at sea. Besides, Captain Mitsos was aware that my folks had written me not a few letters begging me to come home. And when one day the captain showed me the letter he

himself had received from my dear mother, he apologized for having encouraged me to visit the red-light districts. I told him that I had decided to leave the sea for now and go see my folks back home.



Panos in Chania, Crete, at age 18

FOR the following two years I worked at the soap factories of Antoniadis and Ioannidis-Preve in Chania. On my way home one evening I met Athena, a slender, green-eyed brunette from Asia Minor, about seventeen, who lived in our neighborhood with her foster father. Once she and I established that we were cousins of some sort, she took the liberty of visiting our home often. I found her uninhibited manner appealing and her habitual giggling and spontaneous outbursts of laughter refreshing. She was stunningly attractive.

But not many days went by before I made the heart-breaking discovery that the playful, vivacious girl was being exploited by her foster father. Crushed, I begged Athena to stop meeting with other men and promised her I would do my best to help make ends meet.

A month went by but without signs of a change in Athena's lifestyle. What I could not figure out was why she continued to behave the same toward me as always, which made me feel pretty foolish. When I told her I was going to

talk to her foster father and convince him that I loved her, she simply laughed. Utterly bewildered, I began to associate her lively spirit and enticing smiles with her foster father's evil schemes, seeing in her a helpless victim whose behavior reflected a perverted man's diabolical intents and purposes.

Downcast and dejected, one night I returned home only to find my father waiting at the door speechless and my frightened mother in bed crying. Athena's foster father had run to my parents earlier that day to tell them he feared I was going to murder him. Overcome with anxiety and fear, my mother became grievously ill for days. Her prolonged and unusual silence frightened me, and I realized that my affair with Athena was on a disastrous course. So I decided to leave Chania and head for Volos, a coastal city about 470 kilometers away.

IN order to reach Volos, I looked up Captain Mitsos. The captain was pleased to see me again, though this time I met him as a traveler seeking free passage rather than as a ship boy. And free the passage was, but only after I was charged with the helm. That was even better than I had expected, for I loved to helm.

"Where to, Panos?" asked Captain Mitsos.

"To the unknown, Captain!"

"We don't make stops at the gold mines of California, you know," he said jokingly.

"Just heading for that soap factory up north, I guess, Captain. You do remember the factory owner in Volos you introduced me to a while back, don't you?"

Captain Mitsos nodded. "Well, my good friend," he said, "at least I'll know where to find you."

TIME in Volos brought healing to my battered heart. It also afforded me the opportunity to learn to cut soap, a technique practiced in Chania by only a handful of specialists. After a year in Volos it was nearly time for me

to join the army, so I decided to return home to spend some time with my family.

I RETURNED home just in time for the 1927 carnival. A number of costume-flaunting friends and I entered a house where earlier in the day I had left my mandolin. Seated on the windowsill and strumming my mandolin was a girl of about seventeen, whose thick black wavy hair richly caressed her striking face. She was not dressed in holiday style, and judging by the unalarmed expression in her big brown eyes, I was certain that she must have thought I was a flamboyant, garrulous woman with extravagant taste in clothes and who particularly delighted in fluttering about in the company of many men. Apparently my affected voice and feminine gestures concealed my identity as a male.

“I see you play the mandolin?” was my introductory remark.

“Oh, not really—” the damsel replied in a clear and pleasant voice, her eyes admiring the magnificent plumage atop my huge red hat.

“May I?” I asked, my hands extended.

“Certainly,” she said, as she placed the mandolin on the black leather gloves that concealed my hairy arms.

My performance impressed her. “You play very well!” she exclaimed.

“Won’t you join us tonight?” I inquired, taking great care to maintain my affected mannerisms.

Turning slowly sideways and looking out of the window she said, “My mother won’t let me go with anyone out at night.”

Her modest, unpretentious character was particularly appealing to me, especially as it was accompanied by a mellow voice that rang with loyalty and trust—most desirable traits to me now. Her subdued manner of talk and resigned expression seemed void of any trace of struggle. She seemed patient and calm, looked plain and neat, and was attractively lonely.

Though I had concerns that my obvious attraction to the girl and the interest I was taking in her might cause my disguise to slip, I found it nevertheless fascinating to be able to meet such a fine lady from the vantage point of a “woman” and at the same time through the eyes of a man. As I was debating whether to reveal my identity, my buddies suddenly came and grabbed me away from her. “Come on, Panos,” they shouted. “Let’s beat it!”

Well, no use pretending anymore. “Good night—miss!” I called loudly in my normal voice as loose limbs and mandolin flew in the air over the heads of those carrying me away like Helen of Troy! I saw the girl place her hands over her cheeks in utter surprise. Never mind, I thought to myself. Better if she met me in my Sunday best.

That night I learned that the girl’s name was Chrysa, a dressmaker from Smyrna, who escaped from the holocaust of Smyrna in 1922 with her widowed mother and her grandmother and fled to Athens and eventually resettled in Chania; and that her ailing father had been captured by the Turks at his home in Smyrna before her five-year-old eyes.

A SUCCESSION of unusual happenings developed during the ensuing two weeks. My mother and Chrysa’s mother, Mrs. Theodora, became well acquainted through numerous visits they exchanged. Since I was not allowed to meet Chrysa on my own and only with Mrs. Theodora’s permission and strictly under her supervision—a rule I felt would be impossible to follow—I requested that both Chrysa and I be included in one of those visits.

Request granted. One night Chrysa and her mother, as well as her grandmother, aunt, and a number of relatives arrived at our home, along with all my aunts and uncles and every member of the grapevine. In a room filled beyond capacity, all the men managed to gather around me on one side, and all the women around Chrysa on the other. I realized then that this unprecedented social phenomenon had brought me an opportunity I should seize.



Chrysa, aged 2; her grandmother, Maryi (seated); her mother, Theodora; and her father, Demetrios. Taken in Smyrna around 1912, this is Chrysa's only childhood and family photo available.

Knowing that exchanging a word with Chrysa in private was a mere impossibility, not only on account of her mother's watchful eye but also of the many other scrutinizing eyes fixed on me and Chrysa at all times, I

heroically came to Chrysa's rescue. Suddenly I stood up and prepared all ears and eyes for a proclamation in bold print.

"Mrs. Theodora," I said, "in the presence of all our honorable guests, I have something important to say to you tonight." Dead silence prevailed, all eyes on my smiling face. "I would like to request your consent to my becoming engaged to your daughter Chrysa."

Mouths dropped, eyes opened wide. Everyone looked astounded—except Chrysa's mother.

"We all know that you are a good young man, Panos," Mrs. Theodora said unhesitatingly. "It's all right with me if it's all right with your good parents."

"But, my son—pretty soon you'll be going to the army—" my concerned mother pleaded.

"That's exactly the reason," I said. "This way while I'm gone I won't look for another Chrysa," I went on, my wittiness losing out to the gravity of the moment. Chrysa was fidgeting with a lace handkerchief as our eyes met momentarily. A faint blush crept quickly into her cheeks. "There simply isn't another Chrysa," I added, triggering a crying spell among the women.

TWO months after Chrysa and I became engaged I joined the army. I was first sent to the island of Mytilini (Lesbos) and later to the town of Kavalla in northern Greece.

EIGHTEEN long months later I finally returned home. Before Chrysa and I could get married, I had to find work that would support the two of us, her mother, and her grandmother. Because work at the soap factories in Chania was extremely slow, I tried many odd jobs, the most profitable of which turned out to be the auctioning of real estate property formerly in Turkish hands. Though the auctions at first were held once a week, profits were high. Chrysa and I decided to get married and settle in Splantzia. Our wedding date: December 7, 1930.



Panos and Chrysa on their wedding day  
December 7, 1930

PROFITS continued to climb but I wondered how much longer the auctioning of properties would last. There had to be a time, I reasoned, perhaps not in the distant future, when there would be no more properties to auction, which would mean the end of my real estate career. So I deemed it wise to invest in some kind of profitable business. Since many knew me as an honest, hard-working salesman, building up my clientele would be simple, I figured.

Despite repeated warnings from family and friends, I entered a partnership with Tony Zacharakis, a distant cousin of mine, the son of a wealthy businessman in Athens. We each invested 9,000 drachmas and started a private mail service business, handling the shipment of commodities for merchants, dealers, and private parties. This type of business required extensive traveling, voluminous bookkeeping, frequent personal contacts with satisfied customers, and excellent credit.

BUSINESS went well for the first eight months, but the arrival of 1932 brought a sudden and calamitous end to my dreams and hopes. The effects of the Great Depression in America had already spread throughout Europe and reached Greece. By then the Greek nation itself was well into a state of economic depression that had started in 1929. By the end of 1931 the Greek drachma, which depended on the American dollar, had lost seventy-five percent of its 1928 value. Consequently travel, the lifeblood of our mail business, decreased to a record low, immediately affecting ninety-five percent of our business activity. In addition, early in 1932—much sooner even than I had feared—the auctioning of properties came to a complete halt.

The situation became hopeless: business ground to a halt and our debtors vanished. In vain did I cover countless kilometers on foot in the sweltering heat trying to collect from them. And if I happened to catch one, he would beg me to wait a little longer and make all kinds of promises, or simply turn his pockets inside out and start talking about his starving children, tears running down his face. Then, at

the end of the day, irked and worn out, I would return home only to find insolent creditors at the door pestering my pregnant wife, demanding cash, and threatening us with lawsuits.

And where was Tony? He, too, had vanished. He would take off for Athens without notice, leaving me to do all the footwork, the chasing, the begging. Then suddenly he would reappear just to ask me if I had collected anything and pressure me to take matters to litigation. I threatened to break up our partnership but Tony knew I could not afford to. Our partnership was my only hope for survival.

BY THE middle of 1933, lawsuits were pending against our partnership. Lack of travel had more than crippled our business. Our liabilities far exceeded our assets and we were unable to liquidate. Having reached a state of insolvency, our partnership came to a speedy end and we went bankrupt.

THE rising of the sun now signaled my daily exodus. I spent all my waking hours seeking work. I had to feed my one-year-old boy, Terpandros, my patient wife, her mother, and her grandmother. And myself.

Imagination had to stretch beyond its boundaries—anything to get a worthless drachma, a piece of bread. Gardening? Yes, gardening—go to it. There's a vacant lot behind the bank. It's full of junk. Clean it up and plant a garden. The bank president liked me as a bank clerk and an auctioneer; he'll like me as a gardener. Experience in gardening? As much as I had in auctioning when I first started—nil. Come on, Mr. President, don't pay me until you see a little paradise—then you make me an offer. Deal? Deal! Imagination tells me I could grow vegetables—oh, yes! ... and flowers, and plants, and seeds for sale!

But a junkyard doesn't turn into a paradise overnight, nor in the meantime does promised money become bread. So, dig all day long, burn in the searing sun, then drag your

aching feet from door to door to see if anyone cares to get  
rid of an old chair, a flower pot, a pair of old shoes,  
clothes—anything. Sell it for him, keep part of the cash.  
Try to catch an elusive debtor. Then lie in bed at night  
wishing the sun would never rise.

Sunrise! The rat race begins. Oh, God, do you care?

